



# Using wikis to enhance and develop writing skills among secondary school students in Hong Kong

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## Abstract

This paper investigates authentic writing through the use of wikis by Year 7 ESL learners in a secondary school in Hong Kong. The wikis were used as a collaborative writing platform to produce – with minimal input and support from their teachers – wiki content that describes the different facilities and features of their school. Over a period of two months, as an integral part of their ESL homework, groups of students designed and put together, through a series of successive drafts, a description of their secondary school which they had joined from primary school a few months previously. After an initial overview of how wikis function in terms of editing and revision, the paper describes the process one group of learners went through. Samples are provided of the students' intermediate and final drafts, as well as snapshots of the amount and the types of writing produced at each stage. The students' final draft became a printed brochure of their 'new' school to be distributed to parents. In the light of this real 'outcome', the paper discusses the place of authentic writing, situated within the domains of creativity and task-based learning, in a school's ESL programme.

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## 1. Background

This paper describes an integrated collaborative writing programme for secondary school (Year 7) students in Hong Kong. Specifically, it involves secondary school students (Year 7, age 11) who have recently joined a secondary school where English is the medium of instruction. The end-product, which students will be working towards through the use of the online collaborative writing platform, wiki, involves producing wiki-like content describing the different facilities in and aspects of their new school to present to parents as an information brochure. This purpose for writing the wikis enhances the authenticity of the task.

Three approaches to the development of writing in ESL are often identified in the literature. The first involves a focus on form – where emerging writers base their writing against ‘models’ provided by their teachers (see Proett and Gill, 1986; Rivers, 1968). The second takes the perspective of a focus on the writer – where the construction of a piece of writing goes through cycles of writing and re-writing activities – the concept of process writing (Cheung et al., 2003; Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005; White and Arndt, 1991). The third focuses on the reader; here, writing is viewed as a social activity where texts are produced for a particular purpose or audience (Elbow, 1998; Raimes, 1983). No single theory can be seen to be mutually exclusive, with all developments building on previous research. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) understand this and propose a descriptive model of communicative language processing as a means of integrating the cognitive, social and textual domains of a theory of writing.

The current paper could be seen to embrace parts of the latter two traditions described above in that it is perhaps a mixture of the second, process writing, and the third, within a social context for a real audience as an authentic piece of writing (see Hyland, 2003). The use of wikis in this project situates itself within a process-writing approach, with the effect that feedback and student revisions add to the writing process for a social purpose (Berg, 1999; Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Ferris et al., 1997; Liu and Hansen, 2002).

When older students (tertiary level students, for example) engage in a specific purpose language programme, the writing they are generating and working at with a teacher may have a real purpose and audience in mind – for example, a report for a superior, the minutes of actual meetings to be circulated for comments, an academic dissertation to be submitted to a supervisor. For students in secondary schools, however, this real-life potential is much more difficult to achieve. It can be achieved by, for example, a student writing a letter to the editor of an English language newspaper – which subsequently gets printed. Less grandiose ‘success’ in terms of audience involves students having their own pieces of writing published in a school magazine (see Reid, 1993 for a comprehensive overview). In some Hong Kong secondary schools, there have been innovative moves made in an attempt to give student writing a real audience. Mak et al. (2004) discuss how peer feedback between students enhances the quality of writing in Hong Kong secondary school classrooms, and report on an innovative project whereby secondary school students produce story books to be read to their ‘buddies’ in sister primary schools (Mak et al., 2007). Greenfield (2003) reports on a collaborative e-mail exchange between teenage secondary school students in Hong Kong and the US. Nonetheless, in many secondary schools in Hong Kong, the reader responding to a text tends to be the teacher, usually equipped with a red pen. Lee’s (1998) findings, for instance, concerning the teaching of writing in Hong

Kong ESL classrooms indicate that, despite their claims about the importance of content in student writing, most Hong Kong ESL teachers primarily attend to grammar both in how they teach writing and how they evaluate it, with content entering the picture all too rarely.

The project described in this paper is therefore an attempt to situate the task – bearing in mind certain precepts associated with a task-based approach to English language learning (Ellis, 1997) – with a purpose, in an authentic situation, through a writing process and with an outcome that is relevant and meaningful to student participants. They produce new, authentic content for their real audience – their parents.

### 1.1. Wikis – background and use in ESL writing

The concept of a simple quick online database originates from the work of Leuf and Cunningham in 1994 (see Leuf and Cunningham 2001). A wiki (apparently utilising the Hawaiian word ‘wiki wiki’ for quick) is a piece of software that allows users to freely create and edit the content of Web pages. Wikis have a simple text syntax, allowing users to easily amend pages or to create new pages or hyperlinks between pages.

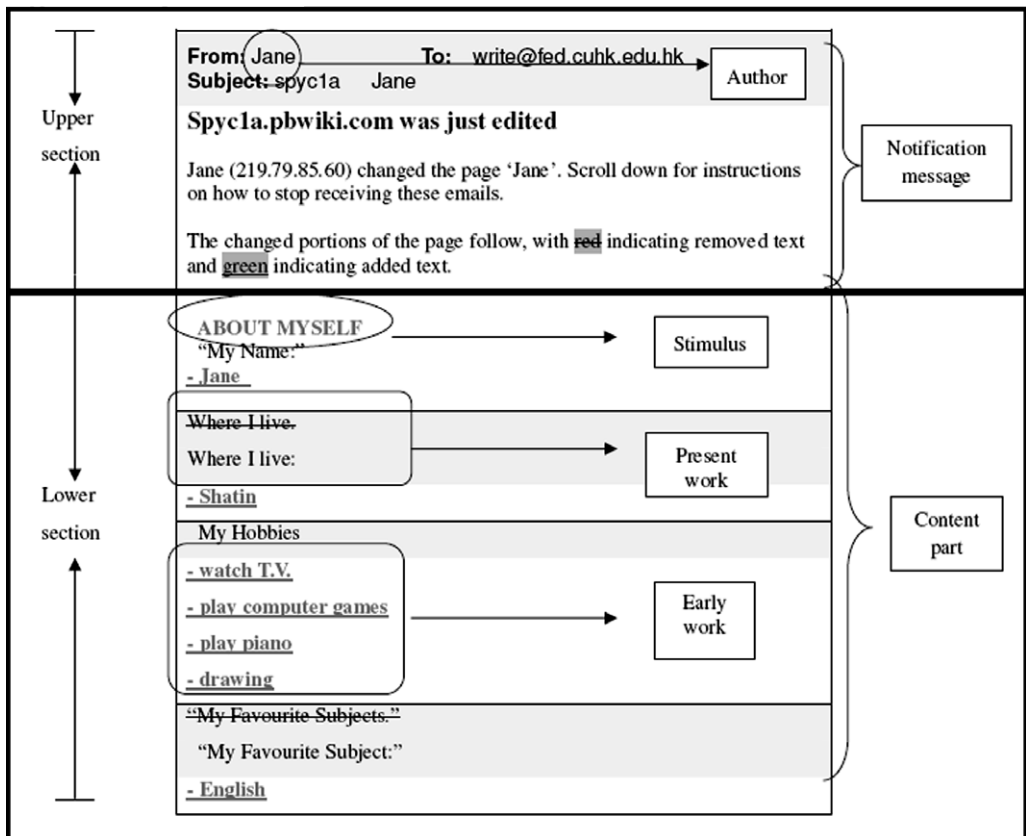


Fig. 1. Sample wiki.

Fig. 1 below (annotated for readability) presents a sample of a wiki page from the study to illustrate how a wiki looks and functions. Wiki pages are divided into two Sections. The upper Section contains the notification message sent to the wiki administrator each time any changes are made (“Spycla.pbwiki.com was just edited” in Fig. 1) and details of the author (“Jane”) who made the changes. The lower Section (starting below the bold line added across Fig. 1) is the content part, and contains the text that is added to or deleted in the writing process. In this Section, different colours and layout are used to indicate the type of composing that has taken place. The initial text (in grey) in the “ABOUT MYSELF” part was a stimulus provided by the teacher for students to expand on. Later text (in grey) comprises the answers already provided by the student in an earlier wiki page. Shaded text (which appears in green in the wiki page) represents new text which has been added; strike-through text (which appears in red in the wiki page) indicates text which has been removed. The use of this colour-coding mechanism (although it is not easy to see on a black-and-white page) allows for easy tracking and monitoring of the different content composed (i.e., created) by a student, and contributed to (i.e., created and/or deleted) by other students. (As mentioned, a bold line has been added across Fig. 1 to indicate where the students’ contributions begin. This convention to aid readability has been adopted in all the Figures below.)

Fig. 1 above lays out the edits done by Jane, one of the students participating in the project. The student began with a heading “My Name”, under which she put her name. She then added a Section on where she lived – “Shatin”. Next, she inserted a new title “My Hobbies” under which she included a number of activities. She then amended “My Favourite Subjects” to include some information about her own favourite subject, English.

## 1.2. Wikis – educational possibilities

The educational possibilities of wikis have become apparent, and their use in first and second language learning has quickly increased (see Richardson, 2006, also <http://www.teachersfirst.com/content/wiki/wikiideas2.cfm>).

In the field of L1 learning, many educators have found wikis useful in promoting collaborative writing. Hodgson (2006), for example, describes a project in which his Year 11 and 12 students in the US used wikis to write collaborative stories. The modus operandi in Hodgson’s project was that one student would first be asked to start a story; others would then go into the site, add to the story and take it in new directions, after which further students would come along and add their own new Sections, etc. Hodgson frames this kind of collaborative writing in the context of an extra-curricular activity, however, rather than an integral part of classroom activities.

Also at the school level in the US, Wilkoff (2007) describes the extensive use of wikis with Year 8 students to draw on and broaden students’ knowledge and experience. In one wiki-based project (“Discovery Utopias”), he describes how students created multiple pluralistic visions of a perfect society, using multiple types of texts composed within wikis to pose and answer questions such as what is the role of the government, in order to arrive at a collaborative consensus about what a society needs in order to run smoothly. In another wiki project (“Discovery-isms”), students were asked to explore who they really were by debating with and standing up to people who disagreed with them. They debated their ideas by setting up belief statement essays, using media to show their –isms in

different ways, and demonstrating how these belief structures influence the decisions they make. Some students even created their own chat space to share feelings, or to further debate certain topics (see the discussion at: <http://yongesonne.edublogs.org/2007/05/10/safety-vs-panic/>).

At the adult level, Kittle and Hicks (2006), describe their experiences at a US university of using wikis for improving peer collaboration as teachers and as collaborative writers themselves. Hodgson (ibid) also discusses the use of a wiki for teachers in the American National Writing Project [Note 1] as a way to share and collaborate on the six word stories venture (<http://mistereye.podbean.com/2006/11/13/the-six-word-story>).

In the field of L2 language learning, a number of innovative projects using wikis have been initiated. Godwin-Jones (2003) discusses the uses of wikis for writing ESL group projects. Wang et al. (2005) discuss the use of wikis in a freshman-level English as a second language (ESL) course in Taiwan, although interestingly enough, their initial comments actually challenge the notion that wikis are a ‘naturally beneficial’ learning tool. The experience of Hunt (2007), working with his high school students in the US, also seems to suggest that wikis, as a collaborative writing tool, may have their limitations as real-time editing tools in classrooms. He suggests that wikis may more profitably be used asynchronously, which is the case in the project described in this paper.

Wikis can be used for a variety of purposes to aid language learning. For instance, students can easily create a hypertext-based document (as is described in this project); graphical pages and links to external sources can also be incorporated in a relatively painless manner. One of the great advantages of wikis with regard to language learning, process writing and revision, is that as students work towards the final document, all intermediate copies are retained. This provides an invaluable learning tool for students whereby they can see what errors they initially made – and subsequently corrected. Further, the picture of revisions themselves may provide a useful research tool for the teacher herself in looking at development in her students’ writing.

Another factor concerns the length of contributions. Given that one indicator of increasing writing proficiency concerns text length (i.e., the number of words produced – see Homburg, 1984; Ortega, 2003 for a discussion of how syntactic complexity relates

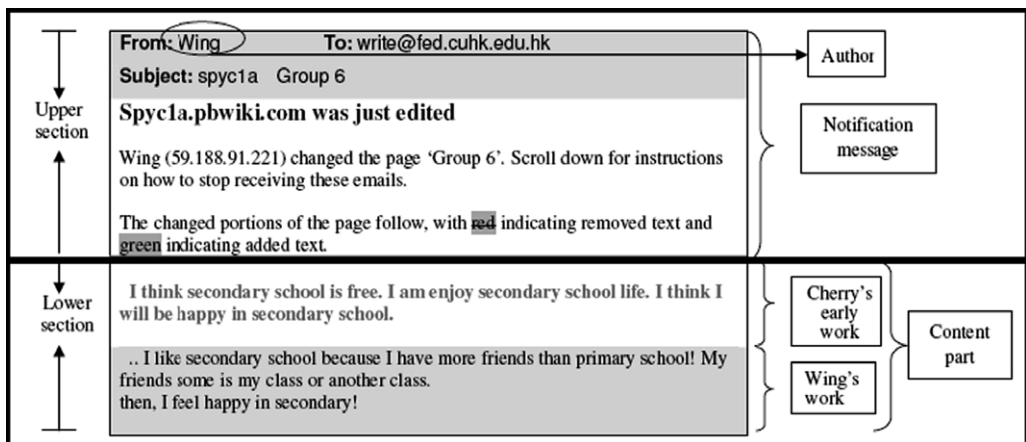


Fig. 2. Stage One – Preparation stage.

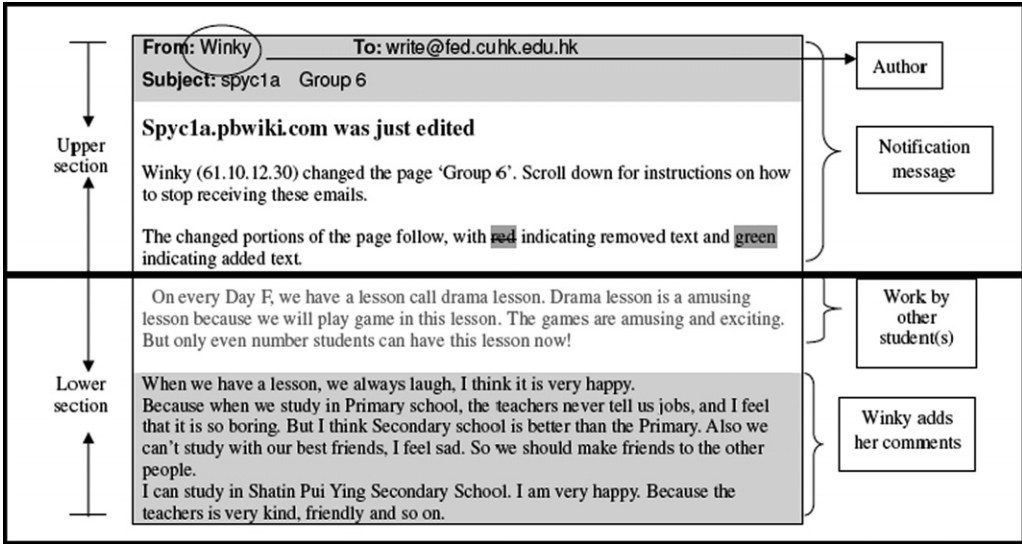


Fig. 3a. Stage Two – Actual wiki production stage (Week 1, Day 1).

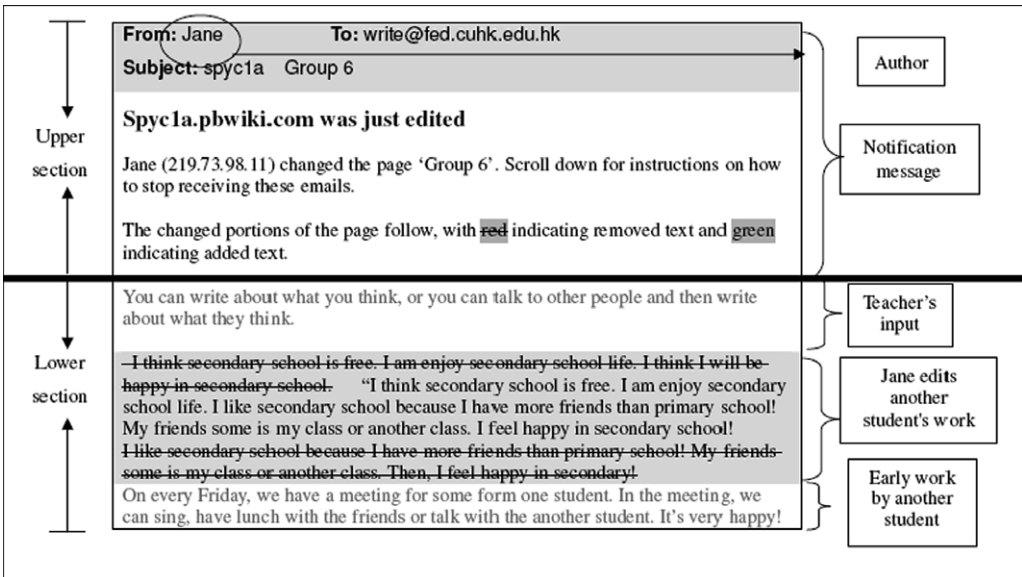


Fig. 3b. Stage Two – Actual wiki production stage (Week 3, Day 3).

to proficiency), how much students write can be examined at different points of time. (A glance at the various figures below, Fig. 2–3c, shows how the length of the content input grows through succeeding versions of the wiki.)

A point to be borne in mind about wikis is that since the resource is open to the world and can be altered by anyone (as with wikipedia, for example, the online collaborative

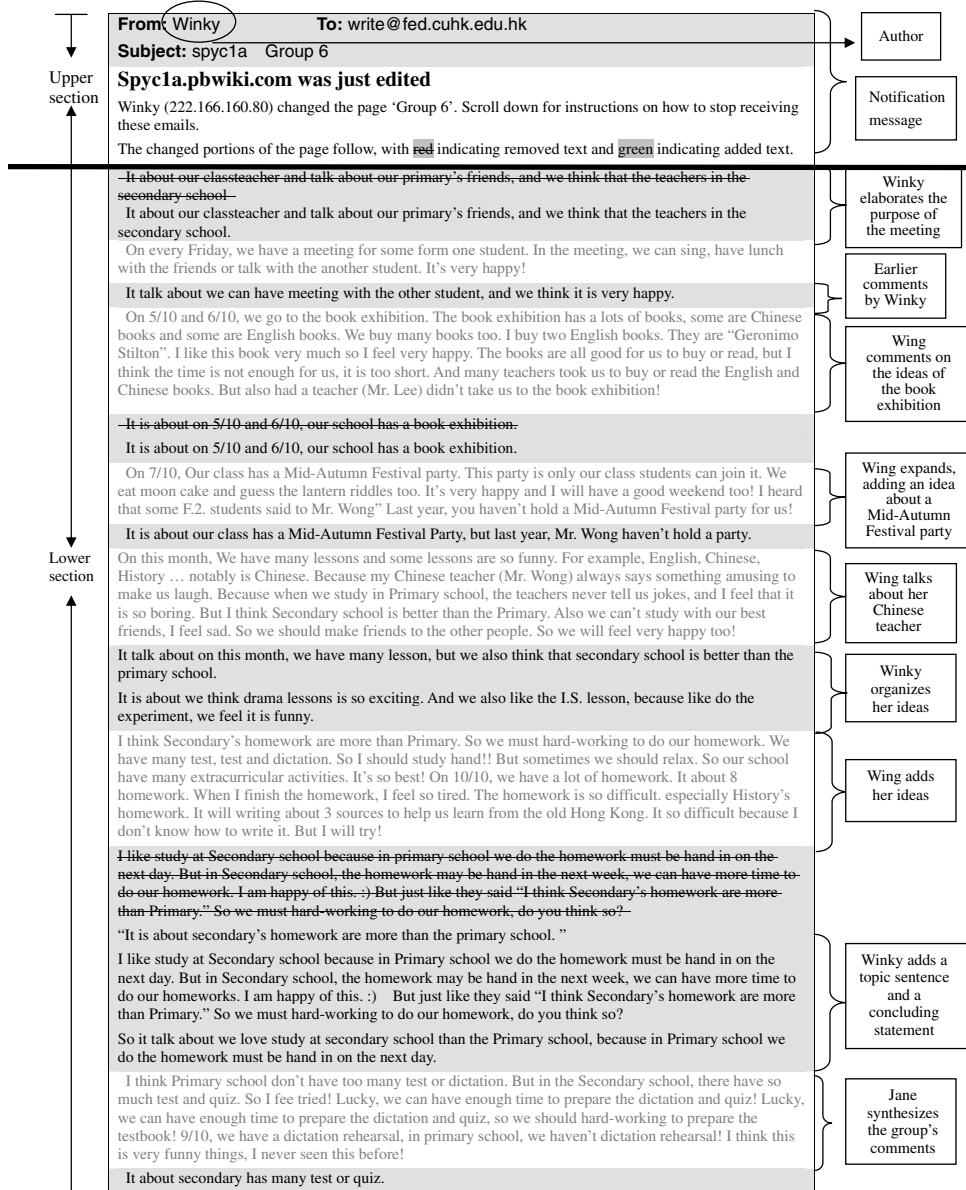


Fig. 3c. Stage Two – Actual wiki production stage (Week 5, Day 2).

encyclopaedia, <http://www.wikipedia.org/>), wiki pages may be susceptible to intrusive or irrelevant comments or editing, or indeed even malicious hacking (Kim, 2004). In the programme described in this paper, the wiki resource has therefore been set up as a closed password-protected system – meaning that only students participating in the programme and their teacher may access the pages they are producing.



2. The current project – students producing a school brochure

2.1. School and participating students

The programme described in this paper involved one class of 24 students at Secondary 1 level (Year 7) in a secondary school (Shatin Pui Ying College) in Hong Kong where the medium of instruction was English [Note 2). The 24 secondary students were first divided into six groups of four by the teacher, with each group taking responsibility for describing a particular facility in or aspect about the school – descriptions which would be included in a publicity brochure about the school, as laid out in Table 1. Each group also decided on the heading for the brochure. The teacher ensured the headings did not overlap.

The school’s Secondary 1 intake comprises 199 students, spread across six classes. The class that was selected to participate was one in the mid range of the ability spectrum. This is quite a limited level of proficiency, equating, impressionistically, to around Level B2 (Vantage) on the Common European Framework Reference scale. This particular class was chosen at random, with the English teacher a willing participant in the wiki venture.

At this level, expectations of writing from learners are very limited. At Secondary 1, one piece of free writing (i.e., in the form of a short composition) of approximately 150 words will be set once a month to be completed as homework.

All members of the class of 10 boys and 14 girls had a computer with an Internet connection at home. Permission had also been obtained from parents to allow their children to do computer-based work at home in the evening. This might appear to be a minor issue, but it can at times be problematic with parents (see Coniam and Wong, 2004).

In the discussion that follows, the work of Group 6 (comprising Cherry, Jane, Wing and Winky) is examined in depth. This group has been selected for discussion because they were nominated by both teachers and students as the writers of the best piece in the wiki initiative in terms of language and content; they were not in fact the students with the best command of English. Students are all referred to as ‘she’ despite the fact that there were two boys and two girls in the group; their full names are also not used.

2.2. Programme design and implementation

The programme lasted six weeks – from early October to mid November 2006. It is described here in three Stages. At Stage One, which took place in the first week, there was some preparation and introduction to the project and to wikis. In this stage, students were briefed about wikis: what they were and how they were going to be used in the programme. Students were not totally new to wikis, even at this stage, however. Since their

Table 1  
Brochure sections

Headings	Responsibility
Our school campus	Group 1
The Shatin Pui Ying Family	Group 2
Interest clubs/extra-curricular activities	Group 3
Lunchtime and recess	Group 4
The secondary 1 curriculum	Group 5
Happy and sad life at Shatin Pui Ying	Group 6



major subjects are all conducted in English, with follow-up reading and writing also in English, many English language resources were used both in and out of class – wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org>) being one of them. Stage Two, which lasted five weeks, was the actual wiki project. Stage Three consisted of printing and disseminating the brochure to parents.

### 2.3. *Research questions*

The project essentially had two research questions. These were firstly, how students engage in collaborative writing through wikis, and secondly, the effects that wiki-based collaborative writing has on the finished product.

## 3. Results and discussion

To exemplify the picture of students' writing progress, a discursive picture is first provided which gives a qualitative perspective as to how students produced text collaboratively, in terms of different writing change functions – adding, expanding, reorganising, correcting etc (see e.g., Falvey, 1993; Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005). Following this discussion, in order that progress may be appreciated, a Section is presented which summarises students' contributions, thereby providing a more quantitative picture of the amount and type of text produced by each student.

### 3.1. *A qualitative picture of text production in the wiki*

Before embarking on a discussion of writing collaboratively, where writing is a process, it needs to be appreciated that for many students in Hong Kong schools, despite the claims made for a process writing approach (see Curtis and Heron, 1998), writing is generally seen as a product whereby, having produced the required amount of words, students stop, down pens and never look back (see e.g., Pennington et al., 1996; Lee, 2007). For many students, expanding, organising or correcting – even of their own work – tends to be a rare event. In terms of types of writing, such a product-oriented approach implies that students arrive at their products solely by 'adding' words or sentences to what they have already produced. Free writing (of the type set as homework where students have to write 150 words) is also a very individual task. Given this, the collaborative wiki environment was a very different one for the students involved, as will be explored below.

In Stage One, where they were learning about the wiki environment, students were discussing general school issues rather than formulating actual ideas for the brochure.

Fig. 2 presents a sample. The page has been started by Cherry (i.e., it is her text that appears below the bold line in Fig. 2) who has written about liking school:

I think secondary school is free. I am enjoy secondary school life.

Another student, Wing, enters the wiki page, and replies:

I like secondary school because I have more friends than primary school! My friends some is my class or another class. then, I feel happy in secondary!

As mentioned, Stage One, the preparation and familiarisation stage, took place in the first week, where students were left to experiment. While the teacher monitored progress, she did not intervene or correct any of their contributions.

Stage Two, as mentioned, lasted five weeks and is the kernel of the wiki project. Here, the four students in Group 6 collaborated using their home computers to put together a specific part of the brochure. Fig. 3a–3c present a snapshot of some of the editing, i.e., changes and revisions to the documents, from the extended sample of the work of the group. This group of students was working on the part of the brochure entitled “Happy and Sad Life at Shatin Pui Ying” – a heading decided on by the students themselves.

The first figure (Fig. 3a) is drawn first from the very early stage of the project in Week 1. The second (Fig. 3b) is from Week 3, and the third and more extensive figure (Fig. 3c) comes from Week 5, when the project was nearing its end.

As can be seen from Fig. 3a, the Section opened with a comment about drama lessons and why the student found them “amusing and exciting”:

On every Day F, we have a lesson call Drama lesson.

To this, Winky, another member, contributed a substantial six-line comment, adding why she had found primary school “boring” and why she was enjoying her early days at Shatin Pui Ying College:

When we have a lesson, we always laugh. I think it is very happy. . . . I can study in Shatin Pui Ying Secondary school. I am very happy. Because the teachers is very kind, friendly and so on.

As Fig. 3a shows, much of the students’ early work involved simply adding to the existing text. As the project progressed, however, and students got used to each other and to the wiki environment, they began to edit each others’ work as well as adding to what others had written. Fig. 3b attempts to illustrate this by Jane’s edits to previous work. (presented earlier as Fig. 2).

It can be seen from Fig. 3b, how Jane amended the earlier comment:

I think secondary school is free. I am enjoy secondary school life. I think I will be happy in secondary school.

by making an elaboration:

I think secondary school is free. I am enjoy secondary school life. I like secondary school because I have more friends than primary school! My friends some is my class or another class. I feel happy in secondary school!

There was still a certain amount of teacher input at this stage, viz., the first statement “You can write about what you think, or you can talk to other people and then write about what they think.” Nonetheless, the wiki was beginning to take shape in terms of new and edited content made by the students, with the content part depicting the evolution of students’ ideas and the gradually more sophisticated comments they were making. Fig. 3c below exemplifies the evolution of this collaborative writing process from the group at the latter part of Stage Two.

Before wikis were available, group collaboration on a document could only be achieved by ‘pushing’ the document out to each member by emailing a file that each person would edit on their own computer. In this situation, coordinating edits so that everyone’s work was equally represented was problematic in that different ideas were inserted in different ways and at different times. In contrast, a wiki ‘pulls’ group members together in that they can build and edit their collective work in a single wiki document. As all group members have

equal access to the most recent version of the document, the sense of ‘group community’ is strengthened because group members with overlapping or similar ideas can see others’ ideas and hence, collaboratively, build on them. Fig. 3c below is longer and more detailed. It shows that, as students begin to write more collaboratively – in a ‘quasi-editorial’ manner – they are able to come up with more ideas and to add comments which others might find useful.

To aid readability, Sections of Fig. 3c are excerpted and repeated in the discussion that follows.

Fig. 3c illustrates the ease with which students are beginning to share their drafts, as they write both individually and collaboratively.

To an earlier contribution made by Wing:

On every Friday, we have a meeting for some form one student. In the meeting, we can sing, have lunch with the friends or talk with the another student. It’s very happy!

Winky, developing and expanding the idea, elaborates the purpose of the meeting:

It (the meeting) is about our classteacher and talk about our primary’s friends, and we think that the teachers in the secondary school.

In another example, Wing fleshes out her earlier text:

It is about on 5/10 and 6/10, our school has a book exhibition.

by adding and expanding on her initial ideas:

On 5/10 and 6/10, we go to the book exhibition. The book exhibition has a lots of books, some are Chinese books and some are English books. We buy many books too. I buy two English books. They are “Geronimo Stilton”. I like this book very much so I feel very happy. The books are all good for us to buy or read, but I think the time is not enough for us, it is too short. And many teachers took us to buy or read the English and Chinese books. But also had a teacher (Mr. Lee) didn’t take us to the book exhibition!

A similar writing development, involving the addition of more ideas, can also be seen in Wing’s contribution, who expands the sentence:

It is about our class has a Mid-Autumn Festival Party, but last year, Mr. Wong haven’t hold a party.

to:

On 7/10, Our class has a Mid-Autumn Festival party. This party is only our class students can join it. We eat moon cake and guess the lantern riddles too. It’s very happy and I will have a good weekend too! I heard that some F.2 students said to Mr. Wong “Last year, you haven’t hold a Mid-Autumn Festival party for us!”

As students move toward the completion of this stage of the writing process, the reorganisation of ideas begins to become more evident, especially when students started comparing their experiences on homework, tests and quizzes, and the teachers they had in primary and secondary school. As mentioned above, individuals’ content contributions have lengthened as they grow in confidence and expand or reorganise their original contributions.

According to Wing, her Chinese lessons are more fun (“funnier”) because her Chinese teacher, Mr. Wong, tells jokes whereas her primary school teachers were boring.

On this month, we have many lessons and some lessons are so funny. For example, English, Chinese, History ... notably is Chinese. Because my Chinese teacher (Mr. Wong) always says something amusing to make us laugh. Because when we study in Primary school, the teachers never tell us jokes, and I feel that it is so boring. ...

Winky subsequently reorganizes her ideas to:

It talk about on this month, we have many lessons, but we think that secondary school is better than the primary school

It is about we think drama lessons is so exciting. And we also like the I.S. [Integrated Science] lesson, because like do the experiment, we feel it is funny.

It can be seen that there was an effective proportion of input among all parts of the piece of writing, with a continual process of subtracting and adding to keep the piece of writing in balance. For instance, Winky adds more weight to her texts by inserting a topic sentence and a concluding statement to her original writing:

It is about secondary's homework are more than the primary school.

I like study at Secondary school because in Primary school we do the homework must be hand in on the next day. But in Secondary school, the homework may be hand in the next week, we can have more time to do our homeworks. I am happy of this. :) But just like they said “I think Secondary's homework are more than Primary.” So we must hard-working to do our homework, do you think so?

So it talk about we love study at secondary school than the Primary school, because in Primary school we do the homework must be hand in on the next day.

Wing adds more information to Winky's statement, giving her own meaning to highlight the significance of the information that she was writing. She tries to answer Winky's question about being hard working when doing homework.

I think Secondary's homework are more than Primary. So we must hard-working to do our homework. We have many test, test and dictation. So I should study hand!! But sometimes we should relax. So our school have many extracurricular activities. It's so best! On 10/10, we have a lot of homework. It about 8 homework. When I finish the homework, I feel so tired. The homework is so difficult. especially History's homework. It will writing about 3 sources to help us learn from the old Hong Kong. It so difficult because I don't know how to write it. But I will try!

By reading through the drafts, it is then possible to offer feedback where it looks appropriate. For example, Jane synthesizes the comments made by her group members on homework and tests:

I think Primary school don't have too many test or dictation. But in the Secondary school, there have so much test and quiz. So I feel tired! Lucky, we can have enough time to prepare the dictation and quiz! so we should be hard-working to prepare the testbook!

Fig. 3c demonstrates the extent to which writing is an ongoing process of discovery and invention. Further, the automatic revision history that saves a before-and-after version of the document each time any student makes a change is a function which has considerable pedagogical value in that it allows both teacher and students to see the evolution of their ideas over time.

At the end of Stage Two (where the wiki in Fig. 3c is located), the students created a final draft. This was proofread by the teacher to ensure that there would be no major errors in the final document.

Stage Three consisted of printing and disseminating the brochure to parents. The brochures produced by Group 6 (together with all participating groups' brochures) can be viewed at the WriTE website – <http://www.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/write/wikis.html>. After the final draft had been checked (although it should be noted that the teacher made only minimal changes, striving to keep as much of the students' original work as possible), the teacher conferenced with the students. Here she discussed the final version with the students, who presented her with photos they had selected to accompany the text. The text, together with the photos, were then passed to the consultancy team overseeing the project who transformed the wiki pages and photos into the brochure [Note 3]. The school principal then gave the final word of approval before the brochure was printed.

### 3.2. *Quantitative picture of the amount of writing produced*

In this Section, data is presented for three phases of Stage Two, the actual writing stage. In order to better show progress, this is presented for three phases, at two-weekly intervals. Phase 1 is the end of Week 1, Phase 2 the end of Week 3 and Phase 3 the end of Week 5.

In these three phases, the four students' writing is examined from two quantitative perspectives. The first involves the amount of words and t-units produced, as well as the percent of error-free t-units [Note 4]. Calculating how much individual students contributed is complicated in that they were writing collaboratively. While brand new contributions are unequivocal, the case is less clear where students are adding to, amending or correcting their peers' work. The operating principle for deciding on whether a contribution should be counted was therefore made on the basis of change to the content. Contributions only counted if they either incorporated new ideas, or if they involved changes to previous student's grammar, spelling etc. If a student made a contribution which incorporated an unchanged t-unit from one of their peers, this was not attributed to that student as one of their contributions.

Consider the following produced by Wing.

The books are all good for us to buy or read, but I think the time is not good for us, it is too short.

Jane amended the second t-unit “but I think the time is not good for us” as follows:

The books are all good for us to buy or read, but I think the time is not good enough for us,

it is too short.

This counted as a content change, and Jane was credited with the contribution.

3.2.1. Quantitative picture of word and t-unit count

Table 2 now presents the quantitative picture of the amount of words and t-units produced by the four students in the group.

As can be seen from Table 2, the amount of contributions varied substantially. Wing contributed a great deal at Phase 1, and little thereafter. Winky contributed a certain amount at Phase 1 but was very active in Phase 3. Jane contributed a lot at the beginning and a certain amount at Phase 2. Cherry contributed a little in Phase 1 but little thereafter. Given that, with collaborative work, the amount of contributions tends to vary among different students in a group (see e.g. Guzdial and Turns, 2000; Lipponen et al, 2003), the data in Table 2 suggests that the performance of students in this group is not atypical.

In terms of t-unit length – one indicator of complexity – it will be noted that students’ contributions became longer as the project progressed. In part, this may be attributable to students building on – adding to, amending, correcting – each others’ work, but also that the more they grow in confidence, the more they write. This echoes the findings of Coniam and Wong (2004) where students, engaged on a four-week project using Internet Relay Chat, tended to produce longer t-units as the project progressed. One consequence of the longer t-units (and greater complexity in their writing) can, however, be an increased error rate (also evidenced in Coniam and Wong, 2004) – although the data in Table 2 is too sparse to really be able to comment on this.

3.2.2. Quantitative picture of writing change functions – adding, expanding, reorganising, correcting

This Section presents a picture of the amount of additions and types of revisions that students made to their own and each other’s text. Four categories have been identified

Table 2  
Amount of writing produced by students in Group 6

Data type	Student	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
		End of Week 1	End of Week 3	End of Week 5
Number of words	Cherry	75	0	18
	Jane	390	181	0
	Wing	410	27	43
	Winky	169	0	764
Number of t-units	Cherry	9	0	2
	Jane	47	22	0
	Wing	58	4	5
	Winky	22	0	81
Average t-unit length (words)	Cherry	8.3		9.0
	Jane	8.3	8.2	
	Wing	7.1	6.8	8.6
	Winky	7.7		9.4
Error-free t-units	Cherry	7 (77.8%)		1 (50.0%)
	Jane	14 (29.8%)	7 (31.8%)	
	Wing	25 (43.1%)	3 (75.0%)	3 (60.0%)
	Winky	7 (40.9%)		18 (66.7%)

(detailed examples of each writing type are available at <http://www.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/write/wikis/>.)

- (1) Adding ideas – where new content is contributed.
- (2) Expanding ideas – where existing ideas are built on or reworked in some way
- (3) Reorganising ideas – where editing and organising takes place such as text being moved around, a topic sentence added etc
- (4) Correcting errors – where amendments are made to grammar, spelling and punctuation, but no new content is contributed

Table 3 presents a more detailed analysis of the data from Table 2 above. T-units produced at each phase by the four students are classified in terms of the major function of each t-unit. In Table 3, the second column presents the total number of contributions by each student for each writing category; the three right-hand columns then present a breakdown for each phase.

As can be seen from Table 3, most contributions involve students adding new ideas. This is unsurprising, since this is what tends to happen with most students' free (composition) writing, at least in Hong Kong secondary schools (Pennington et al., 1996). As might be expected, in Phase 1, where the wiki is just starting, the majority of contributions

Table 3  
Type of writing change functions produced by students in Group 6

Writing change function	Total contributions	Contribution by Phase		
		Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
	<i>Cherry</i>	End of Week 1	End of Week 3	End of Week 5
1. Adding ideas	11	9	0	2
2. Expanding ideas	0	0	0	0
3. Reorganising ideas	0	0	0	0
4. Correcting errors	0	0	0	0
	(11 t-units)			
	<i>Jane</i>	End of Week 1	End of Week 3	End of Week 5
1. Adding ideas	24	24	0	0
2. Expanding ideas	23	21	2	0
3. Reorganising ideas	2	0	2	0
4. Correcting errors	20	2	18	0
	(69 t-units)			
	<i>Wing</i>	End of Week 1	End of Week 3	End of Week 5
1. Adding ideas	67	58	4	5
2. Expanding ideas	0	0	0	0
3. Reorganising ideas	0	0	0	0
4. Correcting errors	0	0	0	0
	(67 t-units)			
<i>Writing function</i>	<i>Winky</i>	End of Week 1	End of Week 3	End of Week 5
1. Adding ideas	42	22	0	20
2. Expanding ideas	17	0	0	17
3. Reorganising ideas	42	0	0	42
4. Correcting errors	2	0	0	2
	(103 t-units)			



involve students adding new ideas. All contribute at this stage, although Cherry less so than the rest. In Phase 2, Wing adds a few more ideas; Jane makes her greatest contribution at this phase, correcting errors in previous students' contributions. In Phase 3, all go quiet, with the exception of Winky, who becomes the main contributor, with a substantial part of her contributions involving expanding and reorganising.

The writing change function where least contributions occur involves correcting others' errors. This is perhaps predictable since Hong Kong students tend to spend little time proofreading and correcting – despite their teachers' best efforts (Lee, 2007). Hong Kong students rarely comment on or 'expose' their classmates' mistakes as they do not wish them to lose face.

As stated earlier, students in the project school were required to write in the region of 150 words a month. Given this, the fact that three of the students (Cherry being the exception) produced vastly more than this amount in the wiki project underscores their enthusiastic participation in writing collaboratively on a purposeful task. Further, notwithstanding schools supposedly having adopted a process writing approach (Curtis and Heron, 1998), many students in Hong Kong schools view the 'product' as the purpose of any writing task. Having reached the minimum word limit, the goal, students stop writing and put away their books (Lee, 2007). Such a product-oriented approach implies that students arrive at their products solely by 'adding' words or t-units to those they have already produced. For many students, expanding, reorganising or correcting are not common activities in how they approach writing. From Tables 2 and 3, the current wiki project provides evidence of a different type. As Table 3 illustrates, students are doing considerably more textually than merely adding, with substantial amounts of amending, expanding and reorganising.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper has described the use of wikis as an online writing tool for Year 7 (age 11) students in a Hong Kong secondary school (in which they were newly enrolled). In the project described, students produced a school brochure to be distributed to their parents through a series of collaborative drafts.

The research questions that the study was pursuing with regard to writing collaboratively in the wiki were that students would: one, produce a greater quantity of text; two, produce text that would be coherent and accurate.

Concerning the first question, it could be seen that students produced substantially more text than the 150 words per month expected of them. Although one student in the group contributed little and wrote less than 100 words, two students wrote more than 500 words, and one wrote almost 1,000 words – generally confirming the quantity issue. As the project developed, t-unit length also increased, indicative of greater complexity. In the second question, rather than simply adding sentences (as might be their usual practice in their free writing homework until they reached the 150-word target), at the end of Phase 2 (Week 3) and Phase 3 (Week 5) there was a considerable amount of expanding, reorganising and correcting taking place – supporting the notion that coherence improved. In terms of accuracy, however, there was insufficient data to comment. Some students' t-unit accuracy rose while with others it worsened.

The project's impact could be seen to be significant in two ways. First, the task's real outcome (the brochure) boosted students' confidence as writers. Second, it tapped stu-

dents' creative skills, which is generally not a major concern of ESL teachers or students in Hong Kong secondary schools.

The fact that students had to consider a specific audience (their parents) resulted in them being creative in ways that would never have occurred to them had they been merely writing 'compositions'. The real audience would be looking at their writing for content rather than simply underlining the grammatical errors – enabling their work to be appreciated from a real-world perspective. Further, students were creative in that they each had to write on one aspect of school life such as the school campus, interest clubs, the Secondary 1 curriculum. This required them to first investigate what the school's facilities, clubs etc. consisted of, or how the facilities etc. had come about, and then describe them in terms of what they had to offer.

Another outcome worthy of note was that of peer review in writing – a novel concept for the students who participated in the project. Engaging in collaborative work in writing is generally rare since writing tends to be something that students do on their own. The emphasis placed on peer review was therefore a new, but yet rewarding, experience for the students.

A point to reflect on was the amount of time and effort that the project required (that is, time put in by the secondary school students writing and redrafting; monitoring and final polishing by the teacher in charge). While the teacher was mindful of these issues, she observed how – apart from students' creativity being enhanced – even their interest and attention during English lessons increased following the wiki project.

The current wiki writing venture involved one class of Year 7 students. One outcome of the trial's success was a strong call for its expansion – both from within the school and from other schools who learnt of the project. A number of schools enquired about the project, approaching the consultancy team for advice as to how they might set up similar wiki schemes in their own schools.

One immediate result in the participating school was that, as of March 2007, the wiki scheme was enlarged to involve all 199 Year 7 students in the school, with the wiki programme being integrated into the Year 7 ESL scheme of work and being extended to seven weeks. Involving all Year 7 students in such a manner will allow for an investigation of the extent to which collaborative writing under the wiki platform enhances students' writing skills over the course of the school year. This will culminate in an examination of students' performance on a range of measures such as the end-of-year written examination as well as students' perceptions of wikis as a tool for enhancing their writing and their English in general. An analysis of this extension to the pilot project described in this paper will be research that we would anticipate reporting on subsequently.

## **6. Notes**

- (1) The National Writing Project (NWP) is a network of 200 university-affiliated sites across the United States. Administered out of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley, the mission of the project is to improve the teaching and learning of writing in English in schools by recognizing the primary importance of teacher knowledge, expertise and leadership.
- (2) There are approximately 460 secondary schools in Hong Kong. In one quarter of these, the medium of instruction is English; that is, English is used in these schools as the medium for all major content subjects and also for a lot of day-to-day-interaction within the school such as announcements, assemblies, etc.

- (3) The Writing for Integrated Teacher Education (WriTE) Project was set up in 2002 under the aegis of the Dr. Tien Chang Lin Technology Innovation Foundation, Ltd as the National Writing Project's (see Note 1 above) first site in Asia. It operates out of the Faculty of Education of The Chinese University of Hong Kong with the mission of enhancing the learning and teaching of English in Hong Kong. See <http://www.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/write/>.
- (4) The t-unit is a major clausal unit consisting of the main clause in a sentence with any associated dependent clauses. It has been argued that it provides a more reliable indication of syntactic complexity than the sentence (see [Hunt: 1970](#)).

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